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MIDDLE ITALIAN SIGNETS OF APPROXIMATELY
350 TO 50 B.C.

THERE is a very considerable family of ancient intaglio ring-stones of Italian provenance, which I have become convinced should be classified under the above heading. Hitherto, following Furtwängler's classification, they have been placed with the "Early Roman Gems under Hellenistic Influence," and in my own book on *Engraved Gems* I followed this attribution as being the only one with respectable authority behind it or, in fact, with any authority at all. Since then, access to a number of the gems in question and observation of their peculiarities have led me to a closer study and to a change of view.

The first consideration that attracted my notice was the large number of these highly characteristic stones compared with the rest of the so-termed Hellenistic-Roman; then, their distinctiveness and uniformity in style, material, and subjects, which seemed to argue a special origin.

They are all broad ovals—some almost circular—convex and with flat backs. This convexity of the picture surface, I cannot but think, led, superficially enough, to be sure, to Furtwängler's classification. Then—and here we find a divergence from Hellenistic work—they are all done practically entirely with the round drill, as were the Etruscan scarabs of the latest type. The design is brought out merely by a number of saucer-like depressions of varying sizes running into each other or joined by broad lines which are also sometimes used independently. Added to these features are other and very significant elements of uniformity. The material is, with hardly an exception, poor and cheap. Of eighteen examples now before me, thirteen are chalcedonies running from white to brownish, and only one or two are of good quality. Three are carnelians, two of them very dull and opaque, and two are quite ordinary brown sards.

Both the character of the work and the material would seem to indicate that we have here the signets of poor people with a rudimentary art sense; but are they the poorer people of rich

communities, like Tarquinii, Capua, Neapolis, or Rome? If so, should we not look to find, as we do elsewhere, cheap imitations of the styles fashionable among their rich neighbors, instead of something so distinct, characteristic, and simple that every example might well be the product of the same hand?

And now to consider the subjects. Here also we note a consistent uniformity. The Etruscan drill-work scarabs, whose workmanship is similar, pictured generally human figures. These gems show almost exclusively animals; another feature which, considered superficially, may have helped toward the old classification. Of the eighteen examples mentioned, fourteen are familiar birds or beasts, many of them shown in connection with

some other object, such as a bird perched on a bud, a gable, a plough, or a bucranium, a goat standing on the prow of a ship, or a dog carrying a strigil and an aryballus. The other four show a

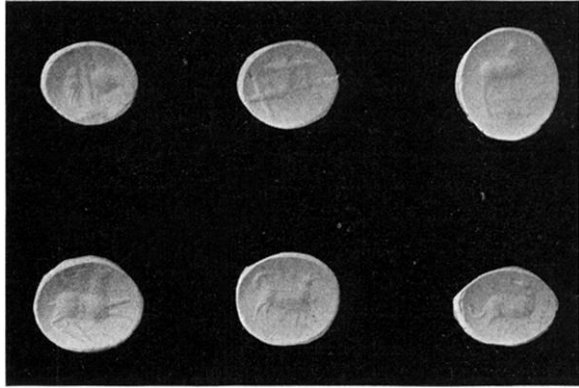


FIGURE 1.—MIDDLE ITALIAN SIGNETS

plough, a club with two doubtful objects crossed behind it, perhaps ox-goads, a Pegasus, and the forefronts of a goat and a dog (?) joined at the middle.

Where now shall we find people whose demands and capabilities would be apt to call into being so distinct a class of signets? Furtwängler speculates very suggestively, though not in this connection.

Speaking of the drill-work scarabs he notes that the religious scenes on them point to an Italian rather than to an Etruscan theology; that they are found all over Italy, which he admits does not mean much in view of the widening traffic, and that their dates are contemporaneous with the supremacy of the Samnites who, he hazards, were surely their spreaders and perhaps in part their makers. As to the scarabs, this reasoning

may be sound, but how much more forcibly does it apply to the gems I am considering!

My own comments on the subject were, I fear, rather in the nature of gropings. I, also, was in doubt whether the drill-work scarabs were made by Etruscans, to a large extent for export, and the subjects modified accordingly, or whether the middle Italians had absorbed some Etruscan ideas and learned the craft from that much more advanced race. Then I seem to have had a glimmering of perception that might well have led further. I wrote:

"As a suggestion, it seems, at first glance, rather surprising that, with the long lines of finished gem-engraving among the Greeks of the South and the Etruscans of the North, the middle districts should have remained in a state of barbaric unproductiveness, but, on the other hand, we know that the races of these districts were, for the most part, rural folk, and they may have found it more convenient to buy the few gems they needed. It is, generally speaking, rather later that we find the characteristic Roman work, which, I may add, can be explained by the fact that the earliest signet devices of the Romans were cut in the metal of their rings."

I ought to have carried my reasoning a bit further and I trust I should have done so had I then seen as many of these stones as I now have. The Samnites, Aequians, Sabines, Marsi, Frentani, Picentes, and the rest were, indeed, largely rural peoples, far ruder and poorer than their neighbors of the North and South or even than those of the growing republic on the west coast. Likely enough some of the richer among them imported their signets—perhaps drill-work scarabs—but, doubtless, many men of more moderate means had need of such conveniences. Here, then, we find a hitherto vacant area into which these hitherto unsatisfactorily attributed gems fit with marvellous aptness.

The scarab at its worst meant considerable skill and cost in the shaping of the beetle. The convex forms of the South Italian ring-stones, as they had developed from the scarab and the scaraboid, were much simpler and more inexpensive, and the uniformly poor material is precisely suited to poorer folk. The workmanship, aptly enough, imitated the crudest, cheapest, and most easily copied style with which these peoples were familiar, that of the drill-work scarabs. Above all, the general choice of

animal subjects—a distinct divergence from Etruscan taste and only moderately in evidence among the southern Greeks or the Romans themselves—would seem to show clearly the preference of rural races. It is in the selection of signet subjects, whether they be imitative or original, that we find the truest guide to popular taste. That of simple, rural tribes would be apt to be original and characteristic, and they seem to be so most markedly in the case before us.

Altogether, this attribution of a class of gems as distinct in substance, form, workmanship, and subjects as any that exists seems to me in every way satisfactory and convincing. I have included a few illustrations, that the type may be noted. Once seen, it is unmistakable.

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